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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 TASHKENT 001751

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SUBJECT: SELF-DECLARED PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATES HOLD PRESS CONFERENCE

REF: A. TASHKENT 1732

1B. TASHKENT 199

1C. TASHKENT 1665

Classified By: POLOFF R. FITZMAURICE FOR REASONS 1.4 (B, D)

11. (SBU) Summary: While the five officially registered political parties nominated candidates, including President Karimov, last week for the presidential election in December (ref A), four human rights activists and self-declared presidential candidates held their own press conference in Tashkent on October 3. A fifth human rights activist running for president was reportedly detained by police shortly before the event. The activists spent the event describing the hurdles they faced in registering as presidential candidates, including the necessity of collecting approximately 600,000 signatures in two months. The press conference was temporarily interrupted by three women, who demanded to know how the candidates would promote the interests of the disabled. All four of the self-declared presidential candidates have little name-recognition in Uzbekistan, and are unlikely to meet the onerous requirements for registering as official candidates. End summary.

THE CANDIDATES

12. (SBU) On October 3, a press conference was held at the Tashkent office of the Human Rights Alliance for four human rights activists who have declared their intention to run in the December presidential elections: Abdillo Tojiboy, Ahtam Shaymardanov, Akbar Aliyev and Valeriy Galkin. Tojiboy and Shaymardanov, who are members of the Human Rights Alliance and well-known to post, talked the most during the event. They both prepared handouts with clear, albeit undetailed, positions on political and economic reforms that were nearly identical and called for enforcing constitutional freedoms, developing a program of sustainable development that will double Uzbekistan's GDP in 5 years and widening ties with foreign countries.

13. (SBU) Aliyev, a 64-year old academic and poet who is not affiliated with the Human Rights Alliance, apologized that he had not yet prepared a platform as he had only decided to run for president a few weeks ago. The fourth candidate, Valeriy Galkin, a former engineer and member of the Human Rights Alliance, hardly said a word during the entire two-hour event.

14. (SBU) The press conference was attended by diplomats from the French and Latvian embassies and several journalists from state-controlled and independent news outlets. Poloff sat next to a journalist from Jamiyat, a newspaper owned by

several government entities including the Institute for the Study of Civil Society, the National Association of NGOs and the Liberal-Democratic Party. There was also a journalist present from the Jahon News Agency, which is affiliated with the MFA. Although several articles about the event appeared in independent websites, none so far has appeared in the state-controlled media.

FIFTH CANDIDATE DETAINED

¶ 15. (C) The first member of the Human Rights Alliance to declare his candidacy, Jahongir Shosalimov, was not present at the news conference. During the event, Shaymardanov explained that Shosalimov had called and said that he could not attend the event due to "severe pressure" from the authorities. On October 5, poloff was told by Tojiboyev that Shosalimov tried to take an alternative route to the press conference to shake off surveillance, and made it within 10 meters of the office before he was reportedly detained by police, who then drove him back home and kept him under house arrest for rest of the day.

¶ 16. (C) It was unclear why Shosalimov -- alone out of the five candidates -- was reportedly detained by authorities. His wife was detained by police in January shortly after he attempted to file suit with the Supreme Court contesting President Karimov's right to remain in office until the presidential elections in December (ref A).

UZBEKISTAN'S ELECTION LAWS UNCLEAR

¶ 17. (SBU) Rather than speaking about their future plans for
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Uzbekistan, Shaymardanov and Tojiboy spent most of the press conference explaining the difficulties they faced in registering as presidential candidates. According to them, Uzbekistan's election law demands that independent candidates first form initiative groups of at least 300 persons and submit their signatures to the Central Elections Committee (CEC). Once a candidate has initial CEC approval, they must then collect signatures from 5 percent of eligible voters in at least eight of Uzbekistan's 14 provinces, two of which must be Tashkent and the autonomous republic of Karakalpakstan. Initiative groups could begin collecting signatures on September 21, and all nominations must be completed 35 days before the election, in this case, November ¶ 18. According to the activists, the second stage of the nomination process requires collecting between 600,000 and 700,000 signatures in two months, a difficult feat for a small initiative group.

¶ 18. (C) Post's FSN legal advisor examined Uzbekistan's election law and could find no information on procedures for allowing initiative groups to nominate candidates. The law states that candidates from registered political parties must collect signatures from at least one percent of Uzbekistan's eligible voters, and not more than eight percent of the total number of signatures may come from a single province (Note: Uzbekistan has approximately 16.3 million eligible voters, so one percent would be approximately 163,000 persons. End Note.) During a news conference to announce the election on September 18, the CEC stated that 300,000 signatures would be required for nominations (ref B). In the case of candidates for Parliamentarian elections, our FSN legal advisor found that the law allows initiative groups to nominate individuals by collecting signatures from at least eight percent of eligible voters in an electoral district.

STATE-CONTROLLED PRESS ACKNOWLEDGES TOJIBOY'S CANDIDACY

¶ 19. (U) On October 2, the state-controlled Press.uz.info website reported that Tojiboy had submitted an application to

the CEC but left before officials could confirm that he had formed an initiative group or needed assistance in finding a location to hold a meeting for the initiative group (Note: According to human rights activists, the law requires that initiative groups meet in person to nominate a candidate, and one hurdle that candidates face is affording or even finding a location large enough to hold 300 persons. End note.)

¶10. (SBU) During the press conference, Tojiboy denied that he turned in an application, stating that he was even unsure of the location of the CEC's office, which is supposedly in the Senate. On September 29, Tojiboy and Shaymardanov reportedly arranged a meeting over the phone with the CEC Press Secretary Nizamiddin Nurmatov, but Nurmatov never showed up for the meeting. At the press conference, the two activists said that they had enough supporters to form initiative groups, but they have been unable to procure the appropriate forms from the CEC to record signatures. Despite the alleged inaccuracies of the article, though, Tojiboy told poloff that he was pleased that his candidacy was at least acknowledged by the state-controlled media.

BRIEF INTERRUPTION

¶11. (SBU) About halfway through the proceedings, the press conference was interrupted by Chairwoman of the Disabled Person Society of Uzbekistan Guzal Tashpulatova and two other women who said that they were disabled. The disturbance began with the women first yelling from the street and then banging on the front door of the office, which was then locked to keep them out. Due to a late entry of a journalist, the three women were able to enter the press conference, which immediately turned into a shouting match between the women and the presidential candidates. The women accused the four presidential candidates of doing nothing to promote the interests of the disabled and being anti-democratic for refusing to allow them to attend the press conference. One of the women questioned why unknown individuals like the activists should run for the presidency, arguing that individuals should first achieve "greatness" before becoming candidates. After approximately fifteen minutes, the shouting ceased and the women were allowed to ask the candidates several questions, and from that point onwards, the press conference continued with only intermittent interruptions from the women.

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¶12. (C) After the press conference, the human rights activists told poloff that Tashpulatova is a frequent uninvited guest at their events. On February 1, Human Rights Alliance activists were forced to cancel another press conference regarding President Karimov's alleged abuse of presidential term limits after it was disrupted by three women, including Shosalimov's wife, who was earlier reportedly threatened by police (ref A).

COMMENT

¶13. (C) These self-declared candidates pose little if any electoral threat to President Karimov, assuming he runs (how he intends to square his avowed support for the Constitution with his as yet unaccepted nomination by his political party remains to be seen). Nevertheless, the difficulties they face should serve as a stark reminder that this "election," whatever else it may be, shows no sign of being about real democracy.

NORLAND